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Unit 801: Our System of Spelling.

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This unit for the eighth grade is intended to develop, through an inductive approach, the students' understanding of the reasons for the irregularities and difficulties of English spelling. Exercises and lectures on historical background are provided to help students realize that our spelling system is based on late Middle English spelling, that differences in Middle English dialects caused corresponding differences in spelling, that the invention of printing had an influence on stabilizing spelling, and that later changes in pronunciation as well as borrowings from other languages have caused irregularities. In addition, students are helped to understand that English has 46 phonemes but only 26 graphemes and that the system can be divided into regular, semi-regular, and irregular spellings. Finally, through selected readings, spelling reform is presented as impractical because of the continuing changes in pronunciation, the cultural readjustment that would be required, and the prohibitive expense in reprinting. (JS)

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Unit 801

Our System of Spelling

Grade 8

CAUTIONARY NOTE

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PURPOSES OF THE UNIT

This unit does not attempt to solve the problem of the inconsistencies in our system of spelling; rather, it attempts to:

- (1) give a brief historical background to the development of the system;
- (2) explain the system as it exists today, such as it is; and
- (3) stimulate thought about the merits and disadvantages of spelling reform.

TO THE TEACHER

The three most important terms which are developed in this unit are "phoneme," "phone," and "grapheme." If necessary, review explanations of these terms which go beyond the brief explanations given within the unit. Many of the words which are given as examples in this unit require rather careful pronunciation. Where necessary, pronunciations are given in phonemic transcription and in a semi-phonemic transcription and in a semi-phonetic equivalent. Also, there are several phonograph recordings which might be used to illustrate pronunciation differences. These are available commercially.

Depending upon the type of class and the amount of time available, students can either learn the phonemic alphabet or use it simply as a reference tool.

Sample procedural suggestions are given in the left margin of this unit. It is assumed that you will adapt such suggestions to your own class. The student responses suggested in Sample Discussions will obviously vary from those included in the unit. In many cases, you will find it necessary to ask additional questions and make additional comments about student responses.

MATERIALS NEEDED

Edwards, Dolton. "Meihem in Ce Klasrum," in The Astounding Science Fiction Anthology, John W. Cambell, Jr., ed. (Simon and Schuster, 1952), pp. 247-249.

Hall, Robert A.

CONTENT OF OUTLINE

- I. Introduction
 - A. Why English spelling is difficult to master.
 - B. Influences on modern English spelling.
 - 1. Middle English
 - 2. Borrowing from other languages
 - C. Lack of change since the 1400's: Invention of the printing press.
- II. Phones, Phonemes, and Graphemes
- III. System in English spelling
 - A. Regular spellings
 - B. Semi-regular spellings
 - C. Irregular spellings
- IV. Spelling reforms: Advantages and disadvantages.

IMPORTANT CONCEPTS INCLUDED IN THE UNIT

1. English is not spelled as it is pronounced.
 - a. A single sound may be represented by more than one graphic symbol.
 - b. The same graphic symbol may represent more than one sound.
2. There are many irregularities and exceptions to spelling rules.
3. Our spelling conventions are based on those of Middle English, which was a definite attempt at alphabetic spelling.
4. Spelling irregularities are the result of:
 - a. Differences in dialects in Middle English (with corresponding differences in spelling).
 - b. Changes in pronunciations from Middle to Modern English (with little or no corresponding change in spelling).
 - c. Confusions and variations from early borrowings.
 - d. Recent borrowings which use spellings from the original language.
5. The invention of printing had a large influence on the stabilization of spelling as it existed in late Middle English.
6. A marked feature of Modern English is lack of choice: one standard spelling for one word.
7. A phoneme is a specific unit of speech sound which makes a difference in meaning.
8. A grapheme is a unit of visual shape that makes a difference in meaning.
9. A phone is an individual speech sound; no two are identical.
10. The English language contains 26 graphemes and 45 phonemes. Consequently, the spelling system is not purely alphabetic.
11. Our system of spelling may be divided into three main groups: regular, semi-regular, and irregular.
12. Spelling reform is probably unrealistic or impractical because:
 - a. Pronunciation is always changing, yet spelling does not and cannot change as rapidly,
 - b. it involves too great a cultural readjustment, and
 - c. it would involve prohibitive expense in reprintings.

Dictation

INTRODUCTION: As a beginning to this unit, read the following five sentences to the class, asking them to write them carefully with special attention to spelling:

1. The school choir chose an especially rhythmical selection for its encore.
2. Although his car was a wreck, my cousin tried to exaggerate its value to his debtors.
3. The soldier signed the receipt with a laugh, a cough, and a hiccough.
4. As they ascended the stairs, the psychologist, the science teacher, and the foreign businessman continued their argument about aerial flight.
5. The censor wielded the scissors menacingly as he accused the professor of being a liar.

Procedure

Teacher may wish to discuss this lack of relationship between sounds and letters which stand for sounds.

Correct in class and introduce the question, "Why is English spelling so difficult to master?" Discuss.

(Through discussion and examples, the class should ultimately answer the question with:

1. English is not spelled as it is pronounced
 - a. a single sound may be represented by more than one symbol
 - b. the same symbol may represent more than one sound
2. There are many irregularities and exceptions to spelling rules.)

Discussion Question

Keeping these criticisms in mind, can we find some kind of historical basis to our spelling, or have all of these spellings developed haphazardly?

Exercise

NOTE: If classroom dictionaries do not adequately show etymologies, use excerpt #1, page 4B.

Before answering this question, assign Exercise 1. After students have completed the assignment, call their attention to the abbreviations "OE" and "ME" in the etymologies. Ask what these represent, and eventually point out the three distinct stages of the English language: Old English (850-1066), Middle English (1066-1500) and Modern English (1500 to the present).

EXERCISE 1

From the dictionary entries provided, determine the etymology of each of the following words. Pay special attention to the spelling background of each word and write all variant spellings listed in its origin.

1. cliff -

2. cloak -

3. soul -

EXCERPT #1

COMPARATIVE ENTRIES FROM TWO DICTIONARIES

The American College Dictionary
C. L. Barnhart, ed. New York:
Random House, 1957.

cliff (klif), n. the high, steep face of a rocky mass; precipice. Also, Archaic or Dial., clift (klift). (ME and CE clif, c. Icel. klif)

cloak (klök), n. 1. a loose outer garment. 2. that which covers or conceals; disguise; pretext. --vt. 3. to cover with, or as with, a cloak. 4. to hide; conceal. (ME cloke, t. OF. g. LL cloca cloak, orig. bell; ? of Celtic orig. See Clock¹)

soul (söl), n. 1. the principle of life, feeling, thought, and action in man, regarded as a distinct entity separate from the body, and commonly held to be separable in existence from the body; the spiritual part of man as distinct from the physical. 2. the spiritual part of man regarded in its moral aspect, or as believed to survive death and be subject to happiness or misery in a life to come. 3. the emotional part of a man's nature, or the seat of the feelings or sentiments. 4. high-mindedness; noble warmth of feeling, spirit or courage, etc. 5. the animating principle or essential element or part of something. 6. the inspirer or moving spirit or courage, etc. 7. the embodiment of some quality. 8. a disembodied spirit of a deceased person. 9. a human being; person (ME; OE sāwl, c. Goth. saiwala, akin to D. ziel, G. seele, Icel. sál)

The Universal Dictionary of the English Language,
Henry Cecil Wyld, ed. Chicago: Standard
American Corporation, 1939.

cliff, n. (1. klif; 2. klif). O.E. clif, O. S. & O.N. klif. Origin doubtful. Connexion w. cleave (II.), wh. has been suggested, appears improbable. Steep, precipitous surface of rock, esp. lofty rocky edge of land facing sea.

cloak (I) n. (1. klōk; 2. klouk). M. E., fr. O. Fr. clōke; also cloque, & cloche, in O. Fr.; fr. L. Lat. clocca, 'bells', the same word as clock. Cloak orig. meant 'a bell-shaped mantle'. 1. A garment in the form of a robe or mantle, without sleeves, covering the back and chest and usually descending to, or below, the knees. 2. That which covers, or conceals something, esp. in a moral sense; disguise, mask: to use religion as a cloak for wickedness.

soul, n. (1. söl; 2. soul). O.E. sāwol, M.E. sāule, söule; O.S. sēola, O. H. G. sēula, Mod. Germ. seele; Goth. saiwala; relation has been suggested to w. Gk. aiolos, 'quick-moving, rapid,' wh. wd. be plausible if this were for *saiwolos, but this is rendered improbable by scrt. āyūs, 'quick-moving'. 1. the non-material part in man which thinks and wills; the personal entity of an individual regarded as separate and separable from the body and distinguishing him from others; psychologically the inner activity of which one is directly conscious, theologically the immortal substance of man which distinguishes him from the beasts: the transmigration of souls; the immortality of the soul; a corporation has not a body to be kicked nor a soul to be saved.

DISCUSSION OF EXERCISE 1: List and compare all variant spellings of the three words in exercise 1 as accumulated by the students. Show or read to the class a listing of the common spellings of "cliff" as found in the Middle English Dictionary (all of which were acceptable spellings):

(Pronunciation)

clif
clief
cleove
cleo
cluf
clive
clef
cleve

Plurals:

cliffes
clives
cleves
cliven
clifaes
clive
cliuenen
cleues
clyf
clyffe
clyffez
cleoue
clyuen
cleuis
cleef
cliffe
cliuus
Kilffe
cleuys
Clyffis
Klyve

The many different spellings of a single word in Middle English were due in part to a spelling for each of the different dialects at that time. It would be as if we were to spell the word idea:

"ideer" for the Boston dialect

"ideeuh" for the Chicago dialect

"ahdy" for the Fort Worth dialect

(If necessary, bring out other examples of the differences which dialects may produce in other words.)

Practice

In addition to giving separate spellings for each dialect, Middle English tried to resolve the difficulty of many different vowel sounds ("long" and "short" vowels) through different spellings.

Have students list all of the ways of spelling the vowel "e" as pronounced in the word "meat." In comparing spellings, point out the frequency of the double letter as one method of spelling.

In Middle English, vowels were frequently doubled to show length. Some of these spellings have remained today (for example, "see," "deer," "too," "brood," "root," "need," "heed," etc.) However, neither a nor u was doubled to show "length" and instead of ii, y was written. Much of this has remained today also:

Adding another vowel to show "length" (mae, roar) and using y for i (cry, try).

Further influences on Middle English spelling: early borrowings or "loan-words" from other languages. These became a part of the Middle English spelling system, even if the pronunciation changed from the original.

1. Middle English borrowed many French spellings and maintained them through changes in pronunciation:

French spellings ou and ow for /u/ (as in "bouquet") have come to represent /au/ as in "house" and "browse."

Old French ch for /t/ (as in "chief" and "merchant") later symbolized /ʃ/ as in "chaise" and "machine." Middle English kept both pronunciations and even added the classical languages /k/ (as in "chaos" and "scheme") as another pronunciation of the spelling ch.

2. Middle English accumulated the Greek spelling k, the French g, and the Latin c as symbols for the same pronunciation: /k/ as in "cat."

Some of the Middle English spellings are simply confusions or changed pronunciations in which the original English pronunciation has long since disappeared, but the same spelling remains.

1. The spelling gh to symbolize /f/ as in "enough" and to symbolize nothing as in "through," "thorough," "thought" and "though" represents survival of an h spelling which symbolized /x/ (a kind of guttural "khah") in Old English.

2. sea and see
hear and here
formerly had different pronunciations to correspond to the different spellings
3. Old English "day" was originally spelled and pronounced /daga./ By Middle English it was pronounced "dah-ee" and spelled, correspondingly, day. Now we pronounce day with the /ai/ ("ay rather than "ah-ee") but spell it the same (day) with the single vowel a.
4. The wr of "write" and the kn of "knife" were originally pronounced as two sounds rather than one.

Many irregularities in spelling are the result of more recent borrowings from other languages, in the past 200 years. We have adopted the spelling conventions of numerous other languages, even if we have not retained their original pronunciations.

Spelling ph for /f/ in words of Greek origin: "telephone," "philosophy"

Spelling c for /s/ in words of French origin: "cede," "receive"

Spelling j for /h/ in words of Spanish origin: "La Jolla," "Mojave," "Jose Jimenez"

Exercise

Assign Exercise 2. Discuss.

Pronunciation is constantly changing, but spelling has changed little since Middle English (the late 1400's). Reason: the invention of printing had a stabilizing influence on English spelling.

1. As a result of the invention of printing (Gutenberg, 1445), two important improvements were made in English spelling:

Exclusive use of j and v as consonants;
Exclusive use of i and u as vowels.

In Shakespeare's time, common spellings were:

ioy for "joy"
vs for "us"
vupo for "upon"
fauour for "favour" (British spelling)

Can you think of examples of traces of these old spellings (particularly "v" for "u")?

EXERCISE 2

Select, at random, a page from a dictionary. Check the etymology of each word to see which ones came from another language. Then make a list of those words, which, in your opinion, use the spelling conventions of the languages from which they originated, rather than typical English spelling conventions.

2. Modern English spelling's marked feature is its lack of freedom of choice. Of several possible spellings of a word in Middle English, one has become the standard spelling in Modern English for most of the words we know today. There are, however, a few exceptions to this:

gray-grey

moustache - mustache

Most of these "exceptions" or examples of more than one correct way of spelling a word reflect a difference between the British and American spellings of words.

Practice

Have students try to list 5 other examples of words which today have two or more "variant" and acceptable spellings of the same word. In discussing them, point out, when possible, which illustrate differences between British and American spellings.

For Teacher Reference

A list of most of the variant spellings in English:

(* denotes British-American differences in spelling)

axe, ax*	cigaret, cigarette
aesthetic, esthetic*	cocoanut, coconut
burden, burthen*	collectable, collectible
buses, busses*	dandriff, dandruff
calk, caulk	endorse, indorse*
catalog, catalogue*	fetid, foetid*
catchup, catsup, ketchup	fulfil, fulfill
catharsis, katharsis	gaiety, gayety
chammy, chamois, shammy,	gypsy, gipsy
shamois, shamoy	good-by, good-bye
connexion, connection*	peddler, pedlar, pedler
instalment, installment*	spacial, spatial
judgement, judgment*	today, to-day*
lollipop, lollypop	whiskey, whisky*
mediaeval, medieval*	travelling, traveling*

Review:

1. Our spelling conventions are based on those of Middle English, which was a definite attempt at alphabetic spelling.
2. Spelling irregularities are the result of:
 - a. Differences in dialects in Middle English (with corresponding differences in spellings);
 - b. Changes in pronunciations from Middle to Modern English with little or no corresponding change in spelling

- c. Confusions and variations from early borrowings;
- d. Recent borrowings which use spelling conventions from the mother language.

3. The invention of printing had a large influence on the stabilization of spelling as it existed in late Middle English.

Discussion Questions

DISCUSSION: History tells us, then, that Middle English tried to establish an alphabetic spelling system; however, the present-day Modern English system which is a direct descendant of Middle English is criticized for not being an alphabetic system (for not spelling the words as they are pronounced). Exactly what do we mean by an alphabetic system?

For Teacher Reference

Explanation of the use of the term "alphabetic":

A set of graphemes which stands in a more or less one-to-one relationship with the phonemes of a language is an alphabet, and any such set may be said to be more or less alphabetical, depending on the closeness of the fit between its graphemes and the phonemes they represent. In this connection, we avoid using the term phonetic to describe the way a language is written, because phonetic refers to the raw material of speech-sound.

Through discussion, students should eventually describe their idea of an "alphabetic" language as one in which a word is "spelled as it is pronounced."

All languages, because they are spoken, are by definition phonetic; when we claim that "Italian is a more phonetic language than English," we really mean that the spelling system of Italian is more nearly alphabetic than that of English and our statement should be that "Italian is a more alphabetic language than English."

1. Can you think of examples of words in English that are "spelled as they are pronounced"?

(beg, cat, let, drip, cast, etc.)

2. Can you think of examples of words that are definitely not spelled as they are pronounced?

(notion, know, debt, etc.)

In each group of words, count the number of different distinguishable sounds in each word and compare them to the number of different symbols (letters).

3. In each of the above groups, we distinguished the separate sounds in the spoken word in the same way as we distinguish the separate letters or symbols in the written versions. These separate sounds are important in determining the difference between different words.

Pronounce each of the following pairs separately:

1	2	3
tot	cat	sit
dot	bat	set

Which sounds "make the difference" between the two words in pair #1? In pair #2? In pair #3?

The sounds t and d, c and b, and i and e are called phonemes--specific units of speech sound which make a difference in meaning. (Use other examples to further illustrate).

Note to Teacher

Distinguishing phones from phonemes:

A phone is a unit of speech sound, where a phoneme is a unit of speech sound which makes a difference in meaning. There may be several phones (or allophones) in one phoneme: for example, notice the difference in the phoneme /b/ as pronounced in the words "bring," "habit," and "club." Each pronunciation of /b/ is a slightly different sound or phone, but all are considered allophones of the same phoneme.

4. Remember that phonemes are specific units of speech sounds that make a difference in meaning. In comparison, letters of our alphabet serve a similar function in "making a difference" between written words.

(Write the same three pairs of words on the board that you had pronounced to illustrate phonemes)

In each of the pairs on the board, what two symbols determine the difference between the words?

The symbols (or letters) t, d, c, b, e, and i are examples of graphemes--units of visual shape that make a difference in meaning. These written symbols or graphemes are simply visual symbols and should not be considered sounds: they are written units of visual shape with no other characteristics whatsoever.

English has a specific number of these units of visual shape in its vocabulary--26. These will be the graphemes we

will concern ourselves with in this unit, although we do have other kinds of graphemes. Briefly, can you think of other units of visual shape that make some difference in meaning?

(Punctuation marks, mathematical symbols, numbers, etc.)

Important

5. In writing, the primary function of graphemes is to represent the phonemes of the language.

Discussion Questions

DISCUSSION: If, according to our discussion earlier, we call an alphabetic spelling system one in which the word is spelled the way it is pronounced, then what relationship would the ideal spelling system have between the phonemes and graphemes?

(Students should eventually bring out that the graphemes should stand in a more or less one-to-one relationship with the phonemes: for each phoneme there would be a corresponding grapheme.)

1. We know that there are 26 graphemes in English, but we don't have a similar inventory of the many phonemes of our language. To check how alphabetic English really is, we must list all phonemes of our language and compare with the graphemes. What two main groups of letters or sounds are most of us taught to identify?

("Vowels" and "consonants")

What do we normally consider our "consonants"?

(If necessary, go through the alphabet--26 graphemes--to isolate the graphemes which commonly have a consonant sound. Isolate single sounds only.)

b, d, f, g, h, j, (rewrite as g), k, l, m, n, p, r, s, t, v, w, y, z;

(Through examples from various words, add:)

θ and ð ("th"), ʃ ("sh"), ʒ (as in "garage" and "azure"), ʧ ("ch"), ŋ ("ng").

What do we commonly consider our vowels?

(The students will probably identify a, e, i, o, and u as the vowel sounds and go no further. Pause here.)

Assign Exercise 3 before extending the discussion of vowel phonemes. In the exercise, divide the graphemes a, e, i, o, and u evenly among the members of the class.

Exercise

EXERCISE 3

Compile a list of one-and-two syllable English words which use the grapheme (a as its main vowel. Separate all the different sounds that the grapheme stands for.

e
i
o
u)

From student contributions as a result of Exercise 3, build a list of all possible phonemes for each of the five graphemic vowels:

/iy/ as in meet
 /i/ as in bit
 /ey/ as in steak
 /e/ as in set
 /æ/ as in hat
 /a/ as in father
 /ɜ/ as in cup
 /o/ as in ought
 /ow/ as in note
 /u/ as in put
 /uw/ as in rule

Combine the list of 24 consonant phonemes and 11 vowel phonemes. Point out that, in addition to the single phonemes listed, there are certain combinations of phonemes which have special graphemic representations in English spelling and are important to distinguish. Through examples, bring out and add the following 8:

/ay/ as in bite
 /oi/ as in boil
 /yuw/ as in use
 /ər/ as in term
 /ɜl/ as in cult
 /hw/ as in which
 /kw/ as in quick
 /ka/ as in mix

Exercise

When students have completed and turned in Exercise 4, accumulate and hand to them a complete list of the 43 phonemes and all corresponding graphemes.

When the list of 43 phonemes is complete, assign Exercise 4, being sure that each student has a different phoneme with which to work.

DISCUSSION: In comparing the number of phonemes (43) with the number of graphemes (26) in English, it is obvious that there are not enough graphemes to "go around" in proportion to phonemes. In spite of this, there are, as the list we have accumulated illustrates, many cases in which there are several different graphemes used for a single phoneme. Although this seeming lack of economy stands out, there still might be a system operating in the English alphabet.

Discussion Questions

1. Study the list for some kind of consistent phoneme-grapheme relationship for some of the phonemes on the list. What, if any, phonemes seem to have one consistently and frequently-used grapheme which stands out above the rest? In other words, although a phoneme may have several graphemes representing it, is there one particular grapheme which you normally associate with that phoneme?

EXERCISE 4

From the list of 43 phonemes which we have built, select one and write as many different graphemes (with examples) as possible that represent that phoneme. On your paper, list the graphemes and examples separately.

Gradually develop the list of "Regular Graphemic Representations of English Phonemes" for each of the 43 phonemes. Use whole words freely for examples.
Excerpt #3

Practice

As you can see, each phoneme has one independent, regular grapheme which represents it in most situations. These may be called the regular spellings of our language--one aspect of our system of spelling.

To illustrate that we have quite thoroughly learned these regular spellings, try the following exercise:

Part I: I will read 10 nonsense words to you. On a sheet of paper, spell each word as you most naturally would expect it to be spelled.

(Phonemic transcriptions)

1. clab	kɫæb
2. glud	glæd
3. smate	smeyt
4. hox	haks
5. frub	fræb
6. banfib	bænfib
7. plath	plæe
8. wenrite	wenrayt
9. oldent	oldent
10. ingsad	ɪŋsæd

Part II: I will write five nonsense words on the board. Guess what pronunciation each word should have, making your choices logical according to what you normally would expect.

1. shrump
2. thrope
3. nart
4. zebe
5. briswed

(Call upon selected students to give their pronunciations and then ask how many agree with that pronunciation.)

Comparing the spellings of the nonsense words of Part I should indicate general agreement among most students; the same agreement should appear in the pronunciations of the nonsense words in Part II. Emphasize that this illustrates a well-developed expectation in all of us of the more regular spellings of most words.

To be written on board
by teacher

2. By no means are all of our words written with these regular or consistent spellings, as most of you well know. These remaining spellings, however, are not necessarily totally irregular.

The regular grapheme for the phoneme /iy/ is e + consonant letter + e. There are other fairly common graphemes for /iy/ which we can expect to occur relatively often. What are these?

(ee and ea)

When the phonemes /l/, /f/, and /s/ follow a "short" vowel such as /i/ as in "hit," how are these phonemes often written?

(doubled)

To illustrate, pronounce each of these nonsense words which appear on the board:

spreat
toak
liff

Now write what you would expect the spelling of these nonsense words to be.

/nivk/ = neek, neak, neke
/lɪrt/ = lurt, lert, lirt

(The class should have written each of the three possible spellings in relatively even distributions. Emphasize that these indicate that we often expect certain irregularities in many phonemes and that these consistent irregularities may be called semi-regular spellings of our language. Through examples, develop the complete list of semi-regular spellings.)

3. The remaining group of spellings include those spellings which show no particular pattern of kind: the downright irregular spellings. There are usually only one or two of each for any one given phoneme, and the majority may be found under the vowel phonemes and under /k, g, f, v, s, z/.

Check your list of all phonemes and locate some examples of these totally irregular spellings.

Write on board

Pronounce

Distribute Excerpt #4

Practice

Examples:

choir (ch=/k/ and oi=/way/)
 quay (ay for ?iy?)
 busy (u for /i/)
 b in debt
 p in psychology

The outrageous fun of these irregularities is illustrated in the classic exaggeration of the word ghoti: The word ghoti spells fish, for gh=/f/ as in tough, the c=/i/ as in women, and the ti=/s/ as in nation.

Other similar exaggerated irregularities are easy to think of:

oughque is oak (/o/ as in though, /k/ as in baroque)

tteaipn is tin (/tte/ as in usherette, /ai/ as in certain in some pronunciations, and /pn/ as in pneumonia)

Practice

Take a list of common words and write them with the most exaggerated irregularities you can think of. Try the first names of members of the class, if you choose.

Review:

1. A phoneme is a specific unit of speech sound which makes a difference in meaning. Similarly, a grapheme is a unit of visual shape that makes a difference in meaning.
2. The English language contains 26 graphemes and 43 phonemes. Consequently, its spelling system is not purely alphabetic (does not have a simple one-to-one relationship between sound and symbol).
3. Our system of spelling may be divided into three main groups of spellings: regular, semi-regular and irregular. These three encompass all of the graphemic representations of any given phoneme.

Discussion Question

DISCUSSION: Knowing our system of spelling as described, do you feel that the spelling of modern American English should be reformed? If so, how? If not, why not?

1. Most changes have occurred gradually, but several reforms have been made rather quickly:

Noah Webster's American Dictionary of 1828 instituted the following changes:

or for the British our (favour)

er for re (theatre, centre)

ck for que (cheque)

s for c (defence, offence)

one consonant for two in travelling, jewellery, waggon.

2. Spelling reform has been suggested many times before. George Bernard Shaw, (point out as the author of Pygmalion, from which "My Fair Lady" was drawn), authored a famous suggestion for a revised English alphabet of 40 letters. He wanted this change to be brought about rapidly through legislation.

As a result of Shaw's suggestions, one writer named Dolton Edwards tried to construct an imaginary "revolution" in spelling along the same lines. His article can be found in The Astounding Science Fiction Anthology edited by John W. Campbell, Jr. (Simon & Schuster, 1952) pp. 247-249.

After all students have completed reading the article, ask them to discuss what specific changes in spelling are suggested in the article. Begin listing the 12 changes suggested and adopted in the article.

Discussion

How does Edwards suggest going about this reform? Discuss.

Ask students to do the following: In a short letter addressed to Dolton Edwards, react to his idea either positively or negatively and express your opinion of his article. Pretend you are inviting him to speak to the class about his article, but also include some of your feelings or the feelings of many of the members of the class as far as you have observed. Write the entire letter in the reformed spelling system of the article; specifically, use the 12 changes pointed out in your discussion. It may be difficult for some students to write the entire letter in the reformed system. If so, modify the assignment and stress content. Ask several students to read their letters and to comment on what difficulty they encountered in writing them. Discuss the merits of adopting the change that Edwards suggests and attempt to bring out the following conclusions:

Desired Conclusions

Spelling reform is probably unrealistic or impractical because:

1. pronunciation is always changing, yet spelling does not and cannot change so rapidly;

2. it involves too great a cultural readjustment;
3. it would involve prohibitive expense in reprintings;
4. admittedly, there are inconsistencies in spelling, but any changes that occur should be gradual changes initiated from within rather than legislated changes initiated from without.